GUEST EDITORIAL:

South African Council of Churches Position on Sanctions
October 9, 1987

In restating the South African Council of Churches position on sanctions against the apartheid regime in our country, we wish to put forward an essential but missing factor in the debate, namely, the perspective of the oppressed people in our country. Before we do that let us explain what we understand by the term sanctions.

Sanctions

For us, sanctions must be understood comprehensively to include all non-military action by the world community of states that is intended to contribute to the immediate ending of apartheid. Thus, sanctions against South Africa will include economic, military, diplomatic, cultural and any other action that seeks to exclude South Africa from the community of nations and is designed to increase the cost of maintaining apartheid especially to those who benefit most from it.

Consultation with COSATU and NACTU

In an attempt to provide the international community with the authentic voice of the oppressed people of South Africa, the SACC recently held discussions with the two giant labour federations in South Africa: the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and the National Council of Trade Unions (NACTU).

The general view of the unions, as expressed by a union official, is that while sanctions may be painful to the people initially, the choice that is confronting us is whether they want to suffer pain forever or whether they want to suffer increased pain over a shorter period in order to extirpate the root causes of the suffering of the people.

In March 1987, a COSATU workshop, endorsed by the recent second national congress of COSATU, called for comprehensive and mandatory sanctions against South Africa that would be monitored by the United Nations Security Council. COSATU pointed out that selective sanctions as applied hitherto are actually dangerous and counter-productive because they create serious regional unemployment, further monopolisation of the South African economy and generally serve the interests of the trans-national corporations and state. (E.g. Some firms have relocated away from the areas of chronic unrest under the pretext of divesting or moving nearer to the markets.) COSATU has also called for the involvement of workers in the decision-making relating to disinvestment and divestment so that the interests of the workers are not trampled upon when such an action takes place. COSATU has also called on the world community to accept the fact that the ending of apartheid means a change of the government for if they come to accept that reality they may be able to prescribe the correct combination of sanctions.

Sanctions Target: The South African Government

The same stand, i.e. supporting sanctions as a way of pressurizing the regime to abandon apartheid, is taken by internal political organizations of the oppressed majority and the banned liberation movements.

We know that there are people and some organizations that are opposed to this call for sanctions because they benefit directly or indirectly from the apartheid system.

The South African Churches have recognized the fact that the authentic voice of the oppressed people as expressed through their unions and political organizations has called for sanctions with a sting against the South African government. In response to the problems that may be created by sanctions, the Methodist Churches of South Africa have pointed out that the responsibility for any hardship that may arise lies with the Southern African government and not with the people who are struggling to free themselves from the snare that is apartheid. The Catholic Church in Southern Africa has pointed out in an explanatory paper that the issue of who controls investments is indissolubly bound up with the question as to who controls society as a whole. Thus, they argue, the question is not simply one of job loss with disinvestment or job creation with investment. Those who are concerned with job creation must also be concerned with the creation of a new economic structure in South Africa.

Constructive Disengagement

In conclusion, we wish to point out that the issue of sanctions against the apartheid regime must be seen in the context of the total struggle against apartheid. It will not be sanctions alone that will bring about an end to apartheid but the determined struggle of the people of South Africa. Their call to the international community is that if they cannot see their way clear to support their just struggle, the least they can do is to stop supporting and prop up the apartheid regime. Sanctions are one way in which the international community can embark on a programme of "constructive disengagement" from the apartheid system and thereby leaving it open for the people to smash it and extirpate it from the face of the earth.

The South African Council of Churches joins the majority of the people of South Africa in calling for immediate, comprehensive and mandatory sanctions that are aimed at sapping the energy of the apartheid state. We believe that the imposition of such sanctions is the only way to effect change in South Africa with minimum violence.